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Haig Is Probing News Leaks From Office Of Nominee for U.S. African Affairs Post

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Chester Crocker's confirmation as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs now faces trouble in the State Department as well as in the Senate.

Secretary of State Alexander Haig has started investigating recent leaks of confidential documents from Mr. Crocker's bureau to newspapers; and high-level State Department officials are making it clear that they hold Mr. Crocker responsible. Mr. Crocker has been running the bureau since January, although he hasn't been confirmed by the Senate.

"Let me suggest that the leaks are atrocious and appalling to me," Mr. Haig told newspaper editors and broadcasters at a State Department forum.

Whether Mr. Crocker's nomination will be withdrawn won't be clear until the investigation is completed, probably late this week or early next week. But State Department officials say that is possible.

If the nomination is withdrawn, it will be a blow to national security adviser Richard Allen, who pushed Mr. Crocker for the job. And it will be a victory for Sen. Jesse Helms (R., N.C.) who long has opposed Mr. Crocker as too close to the Carter administration in his policy ideas. Mr. Helms has said that the Carter administration put close ties with black Africa ahead of friendly relations with white-dominated South Africa and that this administration mustn't follow that line.

State Department officials insist that they aren't bowing to Sen. Helms and using the leaks as a rationale for dropping a nominee who has become too controversial. Spokesman Dean Fischer went out of his way yesterday to say Mr. Haig hasn't made any personnel deals with Sen. Helms to win his cooperation. Sen. Helms has offered to drop his opposition to Mr. Crocker if the Secretary names Clifford A. Kiracofe Jr., a 32-year-old researcher at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in Medford, Mass., to Mr. Crocker's staff with responsibility for southern Africa policy.

Mr. Crocker says that he is willing to consider Mr. Kiracofe along with anyone else who applies for a job but that Secretary Haig doesn't want Sen. Helms selecting the State Department staff. Mr. Crocker adds that he hasn't been told that the administration may be reconsidering his nomination.

Regardless, Mr. Crocker, an African expert who served in the Nixon administration, suddenly has few defenders. The White

House now says the State Department must push his confirmation in the Senate. And State Department officials, noting he was Mr. Allen's choice rather than Mr. Haig's, says the White House must fight the battle with Mr. Helms for Senate confirmation. Mr. Helms has blocked a full Senate vote on Mr. Crocker's confirmation since the Senate Foreign Relations Committee recommended approval by a 16-to-0 vote last month.

At a minimum, Mr. Crocker appears in danger of becoming an example of this administration's determination to stop news leaks. Publication by The Washington Post and The New York Times of documents Mr. Crocker drafted to outline administration African policy has compounded his troubles. "We don't know who did it, but as head of the bureau he must bear responsibility," says a State Department official.

Just last week, John Shaw, a consultant on personnel to Richard Kennedy, Under Secretary of State for Management, was dismissed, State Department officials say. The reason, they say, is that he disclosed to the press that the administration is considering nominating Joseph Reed, an aide to Chase Manhattan Bank's former chairman, David Rockefeller, as Ambassador to Morocco.

As for Mr. Crocker, State Department officials now say that Mr. Haig has long had doubts about the nominee's managerial abilities. And they suggest that Mr. Crocker's African trip earlier this year when South Africa's leaders refused to meet with him was "ill-timed." Explains one official, "Our concerns aren't ideological but managerial."

But Mr. Crocker's problems appear to have taken a turn for the worse after a meeting late last month between Secretary Haig and Sen. Helms, whose concerns are ideological.

Mr. Crocker, who has written extensively on Africa, has said publicly that he favors strong ties with South Africa but that he believes it is possible for the U.S. to remain friends with important black African states as well.